

THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

In This Issue

- 2 How cattle can help save the birds of the plains
- 3 Early winter snowfall hit and miss across state
Shutdown will hit agriculture sector
- 4 Stream project aims to restore a mile of Prickly Pear Creek
Medusahead, Ventenata battle employs long-term tactic
- 5 How seeding rates can affect species composition in pollinator plantings
Native American tribes win big in Farm Bill
Hemp legalization could mean big business for Montana
- 6 OPPORTUNITIES

January 10, 2019

Volume 13 Issue 1



And...we're off! 66th Montana Legislature Convenes

The 66th Montana Legislature convened on Monday, kicking off 90 days of debate aimed at changing Montana's future. The MACD Legislative Committee and staff will be working hard during the session to represent the interests and mission of districts across the state. You can follow our activities on our Policy Blog (www.policy.macdnet.org), and in our District Dispatch emails, which will be sent weekly during the session.

We encourage every district to look up the contact information for your legislators. In the interest of that, we've put together a table listing legislators by Conservation District. It's searchable and filterable! Check it out on the policy blog.

Finally, we encourage you to create an account on leg.mt.gov, where you can find and track the progress of bills you're interested in. If you have any questions about MACD's positions, please contact Dan McGowan (dan@macdnet.org), or the Legislative Committee.

**SOIL & WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT
of MONTANA**



**MONTANA ASSOCIATION of
CONSERVATION DISTRICTS**
We're growing Montana's future.

1101 11th Ave • Helena, MT 59601
(406) 443-5711 • www.swcdm.org

This newsletter is made possible
by a grant from DNRC.



How cattle can help save the birds of the plains

National Geographic: IT'S A SWELTERING summer day in central Montana. Here, in the heart of Big Sky country, no matter how hot it gets, blue jeans and cowboy boots are the norm, to protect against the whipping wind and the threat of thunderheads that can materialize without warning on the horizon.

Rancher Bill Milton surveys his land with wildlife biologist Dan Casey from a bumpy dirt road etched into the mottled green and gold landscape, 50 miles outside of Billings. Rolling through the land in Casey's Prius, we're on the western margin of the northern Great Plains, where shortgrass prairie once dominated the landscape. Casey points out an apple-sized bird on the right hand of the road.

It's a chestnut-collared longspur, whose males sport a glossy black breast topped with a rich brown collar. Once numerous in the short and mixed grass prairies that

used to be trimmed naturally by bison and wildfire, the longspur's population has declined by more than 80 percent in the last 50 years.

It's not just this species that's in trouble, says Casey, who co-authored the tome *Birds of Montana*, as well as the state's massive avian management plan. According to Casey, since 1970 Great Plains grassland songbirds have declined nearly 70 percent, a collapse rivaling that of insect and marine fish populations. Climate change, outdated grazing practices and urbanization are definite factors in the decline but agriculture's intensification is the main culprit.

Thankfully there's growing recognition of the problem, and historically unlikely alliances are forming between conservationists like Casey and ranchers like Milton—which could benefit all sides. One example is the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV),

a cohort of 15 entities that aims to protect and restore native bird habitats, which Casey coordinates. Spearheaded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 21 additional Joint Ventures span North America.

"We need more people to feel morally obligated to care about species other than humans or ones with big eyes and fur," says professor William Lauenroth of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

Two sides of the road

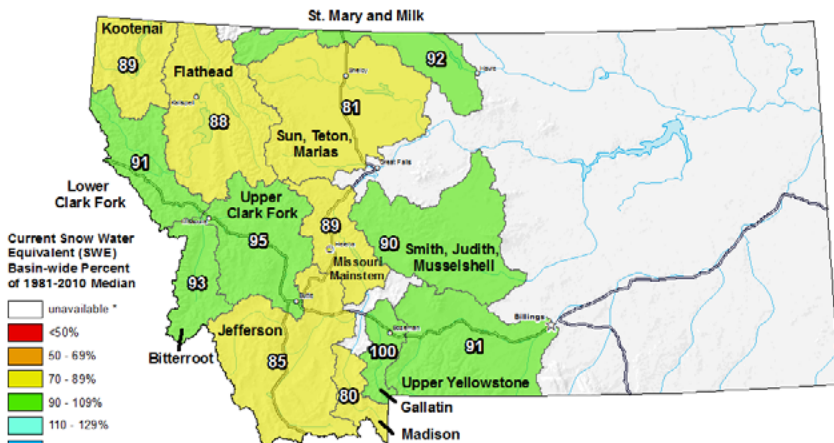
Though these birds and transient and somewhat inconspicuous, they can be spotted with a trained eye—and the economic services they provide humans include seed dispersal, insect predation, pollination, not to mention their symphony of songs.

Casey explains, as we sit in the car, the differences between the left and the right side of the road. The left is dominated by non-native species like alfalfa and clover, appearing as a mix of olive, sage, and green tones. The right side, where we see much more bird life, appears more brown and wilted—but is actually healthier and more suitable for wildlife.

Closer inspection of the ground on the left reveals hard and nearly bare terrain. "There are no grasses for the birds to nest in," Casey explains. Local plant species that once sustained the ecosystem have been pushed out by exotic crops.

[READ MORE](#)

Jan 09, 2019
 Montana SNOTEL Current Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) % of Normal



Early winter snowfall hit and miss across state

NRCS: After last winter's record setting snowfall, the mountains across the state of Montana have received sporadic snowfall so far this year, leaving some river basins near normal for snowpack, while others are below normal on January 1. Early season snowfall has favored regions along the Continental Divide in western and south-central Montana so far this winter, and this is where the highest snowpack percentages can be found.

"What's been unique about this winter so far is that the snowpack in these regions would be below normal for this date if it weren't for the storm that dropped significant totals during the last week of October into early November," said Lucas Zukiewicz, hydrologist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. "Many areas that were overlooked by the early November weather remain below normal for snowpack at this time, except for some regions of western Montana along the Idaho border which received heavy snowfall during the latter half of December."

The month of December was also well above average across the state with regards to temperatures, aside from a cold arctic air during the first week of the month. Monthly temperature departures were 3-7 degrees above average in northwest and north-central Montana and 1-3 degrees above average in southwest and south-central Montana.

"After a long and hard winter of shoveling and shivering last year, it's been a mild winter so far this year," Zukiewicz said. "While that's nice in some ways, it's the cold snowy weather during winter and spring that assures our water supply when it warms up in the summer."

Long-term weather forecasts by the National Weather Service combine the effects of long-term trends, soil moisture, and, when appropriate, ENSO (El Nino Southern Oscillation). "Forecasts issued for the month of January aren't painting a pretty picture of things to come and are calling for above average temperatures and below average precipitation," he said. [READ MORE](#)

Shutdown will hit agriculture sector

Williston Herald: Farmers affected by recent retaliatory tariffs who didn't certify their 2018 production by last Friday won't be getting their trade aid until Congress and the White House are able to come to some sort of agreement on a new budget.

Trade aid is one of several things now in limbo as the government shutdown enters a third week starting Monday.

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said he would consider extending the Jan. 15 deadline to apply for trade aid. Farmers were to have until May 1, 2019 to certify production.

While new applications are on hold, payments to those who have already certified production will continue beyond Jan. 1, Perdue said. USDA has already paid out \$2.78 billion since Dec. 21, when appropriations expired, and has processed \$5.2 billion of the total \$9.6 billion that was pledged as trade aid for certain commodities.

Farm Bill implementation will be a top priority for the House Agriculture Committee in 2019, but implementation is likely to be slowed as long as the USDA is out of commission due to the budget impasse between Congress and the White House.

The shutdown appears likely to linger for longer, as President Donald Trump has vowed not to sign any budget bills without \$5 billion in funding for a border wall. [READ MORE](#)



Medusahead, Ventenata battle employs long-term tactic

Capital Press: ENTERPRISE, Ore. — A variety of invasive plant species are threatening the West's livestock grazing land. Through a variety of methods, Wallowa County land managers are searching for new ways to slow their rapid takeover of bunchgrass prairie.

The Zumwalt Prairie in the northeast corner of Oregon is the last intact short grassland in the West. Unfortunately, a long list of invasive species, including Medusahead rye and Ventenata, is choking out the native grasses on which deer, elk, cattle and sheep thrive.

On a morning roughly 20 miles northeast of Enterprise, Kelly Birkmaier, a private rangeland consultant, and Ryan Oberhelman, Wallowa County weed manager, a, traverse a hillside carpeted with Ventenata dubia, an invasive weed from a grass family native to Europe, North Africa, central and southwest Asia. Without natural predators, the grass has grown unchecked over an entire pasture.

Underneath the thick mat of Ventenata remnant bunchgrass can be found — much of it looks sickly and starved for nutrients. Birkmaier and Oberhelman hike across the field looking for another noxious weed within the carpet of Ventenata — Medusahead rye that is not as pervasive, but just as deadly to healthy rangeland.

[READ MORE](#)

Stream project aims to restore a mile of Prickly Pear Creek

Helena IR: Diesel engines revved and waned as heavy machinery moved dirt above what was once a steep bank along Prickly Pear Creek in the Helena Valley.

Allen McNeal emerged from the creek in hip waders and a worn Carhartt jacket, rolling up his tape measure and using his hands to show the shape of the bottom of the creek, and where water will go after the work is done.

"A meandering stream needs an active flood plain," he said, "and this stream is not healthy at all."

Prickly Pear Creek flows from Jefferson County, through East Helena and the central valley and into Lake Helena. Historic drainage of wetlands, water diversion and reshaping of the stream channel has led to a number of issues now with sedimentation and water quality.

"Normally high water will come out of the channel, and that's where the sand goes," McNeal said. "That sand that's on the bottom is a barrier to fish eggs, and these

90-degree turns, the water just slams into those banks."

McNeal was hired to design a new flood plain and reshape about a mile of the creek to a more natural flow. To do so, contractor Stream Works will narrow the channel and slope the edges. That will allow flooding waters to exit the creek rather than continue to cut into the valley floor as it has for several feet in some places. Rock, wood and willow shoots go in to stabilize the bank. In some areas, material is added to actually raise the elevation of the creek to a more natural "drop" as water heads down the valley.

The Prickly Pear project, which includes three private landowners, has an estimated cost of \$350,000. It is sponsored by the Lewis and Clark County Water Quality Protection District and the Lewis and Clark Conservation District and received funding through the DEQ NPS 319, Lake Helena Watershed Group, the water quality district and NorthWestern Energy.

[READ MORE](#)

How seeding rates can affect species composition in pollinator plantings

Editor's Note: Although this research was conducted in Missouri, it provides an interesting opportunity to reduce the cost of pollinator plantings by mixing in less competitive grasses.

USDA: Now that fall is coming to an end and winter begins to show its face, it is time to start thinking about establishing pollinator plantings. One thing to consider is what species to plant, and which species are best adapted and most compatible in a multiple species mixture. In 2016, the staff at the Elsberry, Missouri Plant Materials Center (PMC) planted a demonstration pollinator planting to investigate establishment of multiple plant species beneficial to the Monarch butterfly and other valuable pollinators.

Species were selected from the conservation practice standard for rare and declining habitats

(NRCS conservation practice 643), and a list of milkweed species recommended for the Midwest. Ten species were selected for their value to Monarch butterflies, commercial availability of seed, seed expense, and bloom time with relation to the presence of Monarch butterflies in the Midwest (May through September).

Lowering or adjusting the seeding rates of wildflower species for pollinator habitat plantings may be effective in keeping costs for these plantings more reasonable. However, lower seeding rates may also lead to increased open spaces in the planting. This may cause other issues such as erosion or weediness depending on the site. The addition of less competitive grasses may help in addressing erosion or weediness issues.

[READ MORE](#)

Native American tribes win big in Farm Bill

Native American leaders say a coordinated lobbying effort on the 2018 farm bill has paid off, with unprecedented provisions that will benefit tribal nations across the country. That effort, with its ripple effects across the United States, has its roots in Minnesota.

"This is really one of the first times where you saw a large number of tribal governments coming together speaking with one strong voice and being able to get

a substantial number of changes," said Colby Duren, executive director of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative at the University of Arkansas.

Tribal governments were historically not granted the same authority as states, but that has changed in the farm bill's latest iteration.

Source: [Native American tribes win big in the new farm bill | MPR News](#)

Hemp legalization could mean big business for Montana

Helena IR: Hemp is poised to grow into a major industry in Montana.

After President Donald Trump's signature decriminalized hemp cultivation Thursday, Montana is looking at what could be a big market — from pharmaceuticals to animal feed — said Ben Thomas of the Montana Department of Agriculture.

"This removed a lot of the restrictions around the market," Thomas said.

Until now, hemp cultivation was limited mainly to research and pilot programs.

But the 2018 Farm Bill removed industrial hemp from the federal government's list of controlled substances, which Thomas said could rapidly change the market for hemp products over the next few years. And, as a high-quantity hemp producer, Montana could also serve as a backdrop for research and development of new CBD-based drugs and drug manufacturing.

One of Thomas' goals is to attract pharmaceutical companies to Montana. Hemp contains cannabidiol, an oil extract that can be used to treat epilepsy and other neurological conditions. The oil can also be used to treat a variety of other ailments, although that has not been proven by the Food and Drug Administration.

[READ MORE](#)

Grants

223, Mini Education, and District Development Grants

The Fiscal Year 2019 deadlines for the 223, Mini-Education, and District Development grants are: **January 17, 2019, April 25, 2019** [Grant Application](#)

GLCI Education & Demonstration Project Funding

The Montana Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) mini-grants will provide funding for educational events and support partners and organizations with an interest in the conservation, education, and awareness of grazing lands and natural resources in Montana. \$50-\$1,000, applications accepted year-round. [More Info](#)

BoR Cooperative Watershed Management Grants

Qualified watershed groups may apply for up to \$300,000 for collaborative, on-the-ground watershed management projects related to ecological resilience, water quality, and water supply. Deadline **January 30, 2019**. [More Info](#)

Montana Native Plant Society Small Grants Program

The purpose of the MNPS Small Grants Program is to stimulate research, conservation, and educational activities that help foster an appreciation for Montana's native plants and plant communities. These grants are intended to promote native

plant conservation through better understanding of our native flora and the factors affecting their survival. Deadline **January 31**. [More Info](#)

Five Star & Urban Waters Restoration Grant Program

This program seeks to develop community capacity to sustain local natural resources for future generations by providing modest financial assistance to diverse local partnerships focused on improving water quality, watersheds and the species and habitats they support. Full Proposal due **January 31**. [More Info](#)

Conservation Planning Boot Camp

NRCS Conservation Planning Boot Camp is a three-week, intensive training course for technical employees that covers current conservation planning policy, procedures and guideline. District participants are trained right alongside NRCS field staff in the skills necessary for developing and implementing comprehensive conservation plans. [More Info](#)

RDG Planning Grants

The DNRC Reclamation and Development Grants Program (RDGP) is accepting grant applications to fund planning and assessment for natural resource projects. Proposed projects must plan for projects that will provide benefits in one of two categories: Mineral development reclamation or crucial state need. Up to \$50,000 is available, deadline **February 28**. [More Info](#)

Events, etc

Crop and Pest Management School

Register now for the 2019 CROP AND PEST MANAGEMENT SCHOOL, which will be held on Monday, **January 14th through Wednesday, January 16th** at Montana State University in Bozeman. [More Info](#)

Invasive Species Impact on Fisheries

This webinar will be held at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, **Jan. 16**. Panelists will discuss the impacts of invasive species on fisheries in the Pacific Northwest. [More Info](#)

Western Montana Grazing & Agriculture Conference

The 3rd Annual Western Montana Grazing and Agriculture Conference will be held at the DoubleTree Edgewater in Missoula on Thursday and Friday, **January 17th and 18th**. 15 speakers including ranchers and farmers, researchers, resource professional and experts in agriculture. Sponsored by Lake County CD & partners. [More Info](#)

Planning For On-Farm Success Workshop Series

Geared toward beginning farmers and ranchers, this seven-part series will equip participants with the tools and the support network needed to manage a profitable business and turn a passion into a career. Wednesday evenings, 5:30-8:30PM. **January 16 - March 6**. Locations in Missoula, Bozeman, Hamilton, & Lewistown. [More Info](#)

Coming Up

January

- 14-16 Crop & Pest Management Workshop
- 14 Soil Health Workshop, Great Falls
- 15 Soil Health Workshop, Three Forks
- 16 Soil Health Workshop, Billings
- MACD Board Conference Call**
- 17 Soil Health Workshop, Forsyth
- 223, Mini Education, & District Development Grant Deadline
- 17-18 Western Montana Grazing & Agriculture Conference, Missoula
- 18 Soil Health Workshop, Sidney
- 24 MACD Legislative Meet & Greet, Helena**
- 28 Watershed Day at the Capitol

Have an event to share?
Please email tmc@macdnet.org with details.

Watershed Day at the Capitol

Hosted by MWCC, this event is an opportunity for watershed groups to engage with legislators about their work. **January 28.** MWCC annual meeting will be held the following day on January 29. [More Info](#)

Management Succession Workshop

Ranchers & small business owners can learn how to prepare for management transitions in this two day workshop hosted by The Ranchers Stewardship Alliance. Malta, **Jan 31 - Feb 1.** [More Info](#)

Plan, Prepare, Pass it on: Ag Business strategies for the future

Presented by SWCS, this two day workshop will feature professionals in taxes, estate planning, law, and business. **February 5 & 6,** Northern Hotel Billings. [More Info](#)

Montana Summit on Agricultural Finance

The summit, hosted by National Young Farmers Coalition, will be a gathering of people who share a common interest in helping Montana farmers and ranchers access financing for their land and agricultural businesses. **Feb 6-7,** Chico Hot Springs. [More Info](#)

Montana Lakes Conference

This conference will gather resource professionals to exchange information, scientific advancements, and management strategies that promote clean

and healthy lake and reservoir ecosystems. Whitefish, **March 13-15 2019.** Hosted by the Whitefish Lake Institute, sponsored by DNRC, Flathead CD. [More Info](#)

Jobs

DNRC Rangelands Program Working Lands Internships

This internship is designed to offer beginning agriculturalists, natural resource and range specialists the real-world and hands-on experience implementing the educational tools already gained to a ranching operation. Both students and hosts are sought. Application Deadline **February 1.** [More Info](#)

Conservation Specialist - Buffalo SD

This position with the American Bird Conservancy is responsible for delivering technical assistance and developing conservation plans for ranches on private lands that emphasize sustainable use and management of grasslands. The position will assist landowners in a four county area in northwest South Dakota (Harding, Butte, Perkins, and Meade). Applications due **Jan. 11;** position open until filled. [More info](#)

Fuel Reduction Program Administrator

The Lower Musselshell Conservation District in Roundup, MT is looking to hire a fuel reduction program administrator to work directly with USDA-NRCS to further develop and administer the district Fuels Reduction Program. Open until filled. [More Info](#)